

Appendix E: Alaska Department of Fish and Game – Site Concepts Comments

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME


DIVISION OF SPORT FISH

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Bill Evans
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Department of Parks and Recreation
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FROM: Marla Carter 
Habitat Biologist

DATE: April 22, 2010

SUBJECT: Eagle River Nature Center Site Concepts Comments

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) reviewed the proposed site concept plans for new facilities and improvements to the Eagle River Nature Center (ERNC). The Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation (DPOR) is working with the Friends of the Eagle River Nature Center (Friends) to relocate the ERNC from its existing location to one of several proposed locations. Some reasons for the change include providing a larger main facility, improving trail access, providing an Accessible program to meet ADA requirements, developing a maintenance facility, and addressing the inadequate space and space conflicts that are occurring among visitors, volunteers, and staff. Through these improvements, the ERNC staff intends to promote educational programs that meet the mission of the ERNC while furthering opportunities available to Chugach State Park visitors. The proposed plan phases are intended to meet current and future demands and goals over the next 20 years.

After evaluating the three alternatives, ADF&G recommends Concept C as the preferred alternative in regards to habitat and potential brown bear and human interactions. Chugach State Park (Park) provides largely undisturbed habitat for denning and foraging bears and is populated by at least 50 brown bears. Without the Park it is unlikely that brown bears could survive in the Anchorage area. Salmon are a critical food source for brown bears and because much of the salmon spawning habitat in the Anchorage area lies outside the park, many brown bears are forced closer to human activity to feed. Clearwater Creek, however, is an important bear feeding area largely inside park boundaries.

The existing visitor center is located about 900 feet from the nearest point on Clearwater Creek and is perched on a steep bluff that deflects most brown bear movement along the north side of the creek away from the facility. ADF&G does not have data on bear numbers or movements

along Clearwater Creek, however, reports from visitors and the history of bear attacks in the area attest to its attraction to brown bears during the summer and fall when salmon are spawning in the creek and readily available to foraging bears. Spawning salmon congregate below beaver dams on the creek and one of the most reliable places to see a brown bear in Anchorage is in the vicinity of the viewing platform on Clearwater Creek below the visitor facility. One or more brown bears are seen in this area nearly every day during late summer and fall, based on reports of hikers, park rangers, and ERNC staff. During this time brown bears and their tracks, scat and other sign are often seen on and near the Albert Loop Trail and along Clearwater Creek. A visitor facility located in the area below the bluff will likely result in more bear and human interactions including an increased risk of attacks.

In the late 1990s three people were mauled by brown bears on the Albert Loop Trail. Beginning in 1998 the trail has been closed during the period when spawning salmon attract brown bears. Since then, no one has been injured by bears near the ERNC and no brown bears have consequently had to be shot at or near the facility. It is our understanding that the new site plans intend to continue seasonally closing the Albert Loop Trail to ensure public safety. ADF&G fully supports this decision.

Concepts A and B show the main facility sited below the bluff and closer to the creek than Concept C. Both A and B have outdoor terraced gardens with a sitting and viewing area about 100 feet from the beaver dam where many of the brown bear encounters have occurred. Bears can be unpredictable and the close proximity of the public to these bears can create unsafe situations for both. Concept B is slightly better than Concept A in most respects. Concept A has about 5,000 feet of new road surface. Concept B has about 3,000 feet of new road surface and more compact parking areas, and the parking is farther from the creek. Concept B has much less road along Clearwater Creek. However, both concepts are likely to have increased problems with brown bears. For these reasons, ADF&G does not recommend Concepts A and B.

Concept C addresses many of these concerns. The facility is farther from the creek and more compact, with only about 1,000 feet of new road surface, most of it near the existing access road and presumably using the old access road to the maintenance facility. The nature center, outdoor classroom, and most of the parking is perched on an artificial bluff. If the new slope is relatively steep and at least 40-60 feet high it may deflect most brown bears away from areas heavily used by visitors.

Although Concept C is much better in terms of providing parking outside of the area where most brown bear use is anticipated, the Phase II parking area is still a concern because it is located below the bluff in the area frequented by brown bears. Currently, on some days, visitors are forced to park within the DOT right of way along Eagle River Road. Perhaps some temporary overflow parking can be accommodated along the shoulder of the new access road. Roadside parking is not ideal from a safety perspective, but crowding is uncommon at the ERNC and minimizing the road and parking lot surface will minimize maintenance and snow removal costs. It's possible that the trailhead parking area could also function as overflow parking for special nature center events.

If there is no feasible alternative to a Phase II parking area, we recommend that the parking area be located on top of the bluff. If this cannot be done, the proposed surface drainage retention ponds could be redesigned to provide somewhat of a buffer between the proposed Phase II parking area and brown bears. If the ponds were combined and wrapped, in an "L" shape,

around the Phase II parking lot, the relatively deep water may deter bear movement along the toe of the new slope, through the parking lot, and may deflect a charging bear, responding from the woods to human activity on the parking lot. The pond would have to be at least 6 feet deep and 20 feet across to enhance its potential as a barrier. There is no guarantee that this barrier would be 100% effective, which is why siting the entire facility on the bluff is preferable.

As stated above, ADF&G finds Concept C to be the best option for providing educational and recreational activities in Chugach State Park while also protecting the wildlife, fisheries, and habitat that the visitors come to see.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed site concept plans for the Eagle River Nature Center. If you have any questions or concerns regarding our comments, please feel free to contact me at marla.carter@alaska.gov or 267-2103.

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